



*The
Ephemeris Prize
2018*

Mississippi University for Women

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The
W
Mississippi University
for Women
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The Ephemera Prize is awarded annually in conjunction with the Eudora Welty Writers' Symposium at Mississippi University for Women. The W is extremely grateful to the Robert M. Hearin Foundation for the support they have provided for the prize and the symposium over many years.

In 2018 the contest received 81 entries from 7 schools around Mississippi. The winners were each awarded a \$200 prize and invited to read their winning submissions before the symposium audience. The five winners and five honorable mentions were also invited to lunch with the symposium authors. School groups were invited to attend the symposium, which is free and open to the public.

High school or home school students in grades 10-12 in Mississippi and nearby states were invited to write poems, stories, or essays on the Symposium and Ephemera Prize theme or Eudora Welty's story "The Hitch-Hikers," which inspired the theme. Students from other states may participate if an alumna or alumnus of The W sponsors them by writing a letter.

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2018 Judges

Pauline Kaldas, author of *Looking Both Ways*

Adam Vines, author of *Out of Speech*

The current Ephemera Prize theme and contest rules can be found on our website:

www.muw.edu/welty/ephemerapriz

Cover: Swallowtails

The Ephemera Prize 2018

*“As if the Ear of the World Listened”
Celebrating Thirty Years of Southern Stories*

Danail Dimitrov, “Speaking English” The MSMS, Ackerman	4
Victoria Gong, “Monsoon Season” The MSMS, Vicksburg	6
Luong Huynh, “Do You Hear Me?” The MSMS, Pascagoula	8
Indu Nandula, “Red Bindis and Potato Curry” The MSMS, Cleveland	10
Katherine Westbrook, “Splintered: The Story of an Almost-Empath” The MS School of the Arts, Wesson MS	12

Honorable Mentions

Taylor Downs, “parental teachings” The MS School of the Arts, Yazoo City	16
Dev Jaiswal, “Color” The MSMS, Louisville	17
Peter Nguyen, “Across the Water” The MSMS, D’Iberville	19
Sarah Perry, “Photographs” The MSMS, Columbus	21
Madison Wypyski, “Heath Ledger and Hip-Hugging Jeans” The MSMS, Pass Christian	23

Speaking English

Danail Dimitrov

“Tree,” said my mother. “Tree,” I repeated. This was the silly game we sometimes played – pointing at objects and saying their English names. “Tree” was the first English word I ever learned. The “tr” cluster reminded me of something hard, rough, like the bark of a birch. The “ee” sounded greenish and unpleasant like the moss on its stem. “Leaves,”– my mother said, pointing at the ground. The combination of “l–v” sounded elastic and mushy like the fallen autumn leaves, still soggy from the rain. This is how I studied English. Thanks to my mother, I could soon describe the whole forest and even use one or two adjectives. I was fascinated by my new knowledge. I looked at the brown leafy giant, wondering what made those people hundreds of miles away call it a “tree.” The world seemed big and interesting.

As I grew up, I slowly swallowed every English word my mother offered me. I realized that objects from the forest were far from enough to describe my changing worldview. I started learning more abstract words that could describe emotions. It was hard. Words such as “joy” and “thrill” sounded crude and counter-intuitive, but as I got used to them, I learned to appreciate their simplicity. At this time, courses at my Bulgarian school became more rigorous, and I had to juggle between studying for three sciences and memorizing the history of my twenty-centuries-old homeland. I often felt tired and frustrated and I would speak English to myself. The foreign words describing emotion made me think of those people hundreds of miles away that have felt the same way. Then I would see my struggles as an inevitable part of life and continue working.

When I turned fourteen, my English skills evolved in a new direction. My family moved to America, and I found myself in a small county school in the depths of Mississippi. There, for the first time, my memorized greetings were countered by the thick dialect of a pure-blooded Southerner. After hearing colorful phrases like “ain’t goin’ nowhere,” I felt like everything I knew was a lie. To survive, I drafted every word I could find to hold against the constant bombardments of prolonged “y’alls.” Eventually, I became accustomed to the South’s cultural peculiarities, and my army of words grew bigger.

In the classroom, I have always felt disadvantaged because of my language barrier, but this bore in me a fierce competitive spirit. I always fought to catch up with someone – until I overtook everyone. Later, I was accepted to the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science – a residential school full of smart people. My transition from a small-town school to the state’s elite school sparked a new growth in my lexicon. I was constantly challenged to “evaluate,” “correlate,” “paraphrase,” “analyze,” and “deduce” my thoughts. Every day, thousands of terms siphoned down my mind, as the teachers assigned tasks like there was no tomorrow. All alone, overwhelmed by

my new responsibilities, I would often curl up and think. By this time, my mind was bilingual, and my thoughts would be splashed with phrases from the two languages. I realized that some words flashed within me a memory and a conversation would sometimes leave me in deep nostalgia. Then I would think of where I came from while the Bulgarian and English sides of my mind would be in perfect sync.

Knowing English gives me great power. I can see the world with one click. I can read out the whole life of a man and I can listen to truths other people died for. There is a price, though; I am expected to give back. I am expected to engrave my life on a paper and constantly expose my thoughts for everyone to see. I am expected to serve with my words just like they serve me. So now, I will gather everything I know, and I will pick out the strongest words to turn a sheet full of letters into something meaningful. I am ready to take on a world full of trees and face every challenge that comes my way – because now I can speak English.

Monsoon Season

Victoria Gong

I was born in the height of China's monsoon season. In the delivery room, as Mama labored and the Californian sun beat at the windows, Baba paced the hallways with his cellphone clutched in his fist, trying to reach his father, who was trapped on his rickety fishing boat, caught in the middle of an incensed sea.

When they tell me the story of my birth, they don't describe how Grandfather died, how the gaping mouth of the ocean swallowed him whole. They don't tell me to imagine the way he held his last breath as he relinquished his nets, his boat, his livelihood, as I took my first breath after barely slipping into this world with my umbilical cord wrapped thrice around my neck, as our wrinkled hands reached in tandem for the light and I surfaced while he sank. They don't tell me he gave his life for me—whether it was a sacrifice or a coincidence doesn't matter. They don't tell me that he is what I'm meant to live up to, a scientist slandered by the Cultural Revolution, exiled to the countryside, a man who fought his way to the sea just so he could feel free again.

I just know.

When the white couple across the restaurant table asks if I have any family in China, my tongue curls up to say that I was born during a monsoon that washed away everything I could have known, to tell them about the conception of loss that has been handed down through my family: Baba's mother passed on long before Grandfather, and my mother's parents denounced her for marrying the son of a heretic.

In the end, I just say "no."

Conversation flows like a stream widening, emptying into a gulf that I can't bridge. I squint at the white couple on the far side. My boyfriend's hand is the shape and weight of a skipping stone, detached from his body. His mother talks of reunions, Thanksgivings, Christmases with relatives a hop and a jaunt in a car away.

When his parents ask me what I want to do, I tell them I want to major in English. "I like poetry," I say. I don't tell them I write about that unexplainable feeling that makes my heart swollen whenever I think of Grandfather lying on the bottom of the ocean while I lie on the floor of my bedroom, blinds drawn against sunny California, but it's the same feeling that surfaces whenever *they* look at me, and I know they are only seeing their reflections in my eyes. It's the same feeling that compelled me two summers ago to write poem after poem about drowning and solitude and, when Baba drove us down to the beach at Santa Monica, to stuff every one of them into a bottle and throw them in the water.

"It's hard to make a living off poetry," his parents *tsk*. They don't see the endless well Grandfather's ghost dug inside of me that grows hungrier for poems the more scraps I feed it.

"That's what they tell me," says my boyfriend. He wants to be a poet, too; he practices his trade on me every now and then.

When his parents leave, we sit on the curb in the parking lot, and he presents to me his newest work. I let the love poem, folded in crisp thirds, sit flat in my palms and try to explain my thoughts to him—that we with our poetry exist in different dimensions, that no matter how we clutch at the other's hand, skin-tight, jelled with sweat, we'll still be an ocean apart.

“Just read the poem,” he says.

I read it, but it is and means nothing.

Do You Hear Me?

Luong Huynh

My sneaker screeches against the polished airport floor where ill industrial lights flicker a pale shine. I sit on the squeaky bench of blue chairs outside of the custody room, swinging my leg as I observe the travelers passing through security checks. Businessmen with cotton suits and khaki pants skip the security line and walk through the V.I.P. gate. Mothers with flowing maxi dresses stroke their daughters' hair. Teenagers with sneakers and sweatpants swipe **the** phone screens to combat the long hours of international flights. Although we were in the same building, an invisible wall mutes me from the rest of the world.

I squeeze the top right button on my phone and watch the screen flicker on and off; minutes pass. I whisper to the empty row of chairs, "12:08. 12:15. Our flights leave in 15 minutes, we won't make it... what if they force him to jail?" With two hands, I fling the iPhone 5 to the air like a Frisbee and clap my hands to catch it. My mind runs through the possible scenarios and potential actions to take for each scenario. After I exhaust my imagination, I tug the phone into my pocket and rub my palms through my thighs, chaffing the thick jeans that are supposed to protect me against the Western chills. But no matter how much I fidget or rub, the uncertain air chills me to the core.

I want to cast away the metal doors and find Dad. I want to emancipate him from the unconstitutional custody so we could climb on the golf car and catch our flight—just in time as the flight attendants closed the door. We would fly to the land of democracy and lead an unfettered life. But I won't. Instead, I sit still with my legs glued together, attempting to hide the bulky Swissgear laptop bag behind slender calves that Dad trusted me with before being shoved into the box.

I pull the bag from under the seat onto my lap; my hand squeezes the sides as I trace the zipper line. Dad's laptop contains words, plain and rustic, that paint the image of Vietnam. Dad narrates the Vietnamese story, beginning from the starving years of 1945, to the tangy smell of cigarette and gunpowder on Grandpa's hair or the squeaks of Grandma's rusty bikes that carry bulks of recycled flip-flop made out of motorbike tires to sell to Western soldiers. Dad tells the story of his blind devotion to communism, for, at the time, it was the form of government that promised Vietnam unity and complete independence. Then, Dad shares his regret for trusting the one-party regime because he witnessed the corruption unchecked power created: government officials chipped away the Official Development Assistance fund developed countries bestowed to Vietnam and sold Vietnamese natural resources and lands like commodities. Dad points his sharpened words against the suppression of the freedom of speech in Vietnam and pierces through the invisible curtain to expose the injustices. His words are like a waterfall cascading through the citizens' hearts, awakening our hidden anger and dusted patriotism. For the powerholders, his words are like needles, painful yet vital.

Ever since his website reached 100,000 followers, the government has used different tactics to mute Dad. They condemn him of “betraying the country” and put him on occasional house arrest. Whenever someone expresses their sorrow, Dad laughs, “It’s really nothing. Other brave hearts suffer more.” He explains how the government officials hire gangs to torment and threaten more out-spoken bloggers and their families. The police hold bloggers and activists captive in jail for over three years without a rightful trial, hoping to trample their fortitude. So often, fearful for Dad, I implore him to stop writing and let the younger generation fight his battle. However, with a sad smile, Dad explains how young people are more susceptible to the government’s abuses. The authorities bribe employers and landlords to force young activists into silence. “My writing is my atonement for your generation.”

Being an activist fighting for the freedom of speech in Vietnam is like being a mole in a whack-a-mole game. One could use all platforms to expose the injustices but being silenced is only a matter of time. The government destroys criticism instead of making changes. I see oppression in the short-lived Facebook posts with bloody images of citizens who were rude to a police officer. I see oppression in the lack of mention about the various form of government throughout the world. I see oppression sitting alone in the airport.

Suddenly, the metal door swings open and Dad steps out. I rush to Dad’s side while gasping for air as if I haven’t breathed since he was taken away. I hold Dad’s hand and although I want to flood him with questions, the built-up anxiety strangles my throat, and my eyes brim with tears. Seeing my worried look, Dad pats my head, “I’m sorry, darling. You were really brave! But we will not visit America. They banned me from exiting the country.” Dad then asks for my phone and dials a relative to ask for a ride home. As we pass the security line, I notice the crinkles on Dad’s polo shirt and the red mark on his right wrist. His peppered hair seems to have turned white after the three-hour detainment.

Stepping away from the air-conditioned glass building, I inhale the moist air and soak up the broiling sunlight of the Vietnamese summer. People enter and exit the international hub, rushing to their destinations with little concerns to our predicament. Standing next to Dad on the sidewalk, I spot the ivory plane among the milky clouds. I wonder if our countrymen’s affliction will travel on the plane to that land of justice our elders talked about, or is it hidden in the air or censored by oblivious minds?

Red Bindis and Potato Curry

Indu Nandula

“Are you bleeding?!”

My hand instinctively reached for my forehead, the pads of my tentative fingers grazing over the immaculate, red bindi.

Though Trey and I were the only ones present on the four-square court, his screech didn't fail to attract onlookers. Before I knew it, I was enveloped within a circle of curious nine-year-old eyes, mouths agape. I faced Trey, chest puffed out, shoulders drawn. “It's a bindi,” I declared. His face pulled into a mocking sneer. “Indu has a booboo, Indu has a booboo,” he chanted, the words soon echoing around me like a hunting call. The words slapped my already red cheeks. For the rest of class, I felt my classmates' whispers echoing off my slouched back:

“Is that a tattoo?”

“Do you ever think she can take it off?”

“What is that?”

From that day onwards, I never again wore a bindi to school. My unadorned forehead never again drew the attention of my classmates. Trey's comment went forgotten in the minds of my peers, but it remained seared in my own.

Every day, I toted my lunchbox to school, filled with the curry from the previous night's dinner and an Indian delicacy of my mother's own making.

I had friends before I opened the box.

As the spiced goodness of my meal entered my mouth, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked up only to see Trey, his face once again scrunched with disgust. “What is that? Pig food?” he asked, holding up my lunch as if it were a snotty tissue. “It's a potato curry,” I replied. With a scoff, he slammed my beloved lunch onto the table and sauntered off, snickering all the way to the end of the table.

I wish I could tell my nine-year-old-self that, in time, none of those comments would matter, that Trey would go on to play baseball in Memphis and get his teeth knocked out by a third baseman twice his size, while I would remain in Cleveland. That no matter how hard I tried, I could never, and will never, be able to completely belong *anywhere* – not even with my own kind.

Even with my bronze skin, red bindi, potato curry, and Telugu brain, I will forever be stuck outside the gates of my Indian heritage. While my mother recollects stories of braids woven with white ribbons and Mysore silk saris, I remember fretting over skinny jeans and chemistry homework. When holidays like Vinayaka Chavithi roll around, unfamiliar words are exchanged between my parents and relatives. Telugu lingo leaps and bounds back and forth between my mother and father like the crickets outside our house, while I stand outside the circle of communication, completely in the dark. I speak on the phone with my uncles and aunts in India, asking for multiple translations of a language that should flow naturally from my lips.

As I look back on those days in elementary school, I realize that though I have

changed, the world has not. I will wear my bindi and eat my potato curry just like the next Indian. People will ask me if I'm bleeding and if I'm actually eating pig food. Instead of hanging my head in shame, I will smile and tell them about the symbol of purity that adorns my forehead and the spicy deliciousness that fills my stomach. Despite this, Indian people will still remain a mystery to those to whom we are unknown. We will always be told to go back to our country. We will always be asked what that word means in Hindu, I mean Hindi. People will always assume that I am a genius with computers, and that I know every piano composition under the sun. They will ask about my bindi and my potato curry, but as long as I have both, I may be able to eventually fit into my unruly Indian-American world.

Splintered: The Story of an Almost-Empath

Katherine Westbrook

My Father's mother died three days after I was born. I would say Maw, Nanny, Grandmother, but it doesn't work like that. I was only a yarn pink ball of baby when she got kicked from life's haughty pedestal. I killed her. One too many fish in the bowl (and someone's got to go).

There is a piece of me that wishes I didn't care for people. Then, there is the rest of me. I think family is another term for glue-humans. The rest of me tries to ignore that I'm right. Of all the parts of me, I always agree that the line is too thin between life and what is missing.

...

I killed you, too. It was Thursday afternoon. Three fifteen. The middle of a spring that felt like winter, too. It was snowing, and the sidewalks were frozen, and you were sick, but you dropped me off anyway. The class bell had just pricked my eardrum and I was drifting past the east side of campus when I saw it.

They say the car killed you on impact, but I was the only one that saw it happen. I was the only one that saw your tilted smile back at me, your crinkled lilac eyelids and a quick wave as you walked around the corner to your car.

You took a glance forward and met a foreign windshield. Your face scattered in confusion.

My wrist broke first. Then my left fibula. Seven of my ribs. And then the impact peeled back every linear plane I understood and started digging a hole in my stomach. Six feet down. Just like you.

The rain painted a bloody halo at my ankles. I could taste it in my mouth.

Losing the only person purposely scrapbooked to my body was the first thing in my life that didn't hurt. Didn't anything. Still, each day when I walked to school, it was the same path down the same frozen sidewalk that I should have taken then. Every time it breaks my body into millions. Somehow always dying more than you did. Life became a repetition of me sidestepping a puddle and drowning. I fell into bottomless puddles for the next eight months.

...

I am a senior in high school now. You would straighten my collar if you were here. It is raining today, and I walk out of class. Wordless and faceless and just go to the bathroom and stare like a mirror's reflection at what I am missing. Doors locked. I am breaking into these millions too often. I throw myself repeatedly against the wall until I shatter like china. My brutal brilliance is singeing the stalls, and the thunder will keep eating me alive. Inside and outside.

I walk back to the classroom. I'm asked to leave. The teacher says I look like a crime scene. I do not see it, tell her she doesn't know the half of it. Tell her she could

never know because when it rains she sees traffic on the way home and I see body parts. Can hear your stapled womb tearing apart. The teacher's heavy shoulders cave like canyons when I tell her, she exhales with a hundred dry mouths. My bones begin to reconstruct themselves backwards. She stays chapped-lipped and standing on one knee. We are tired of trying.

She's almost right about me, though. I'm like a Pollock painting. I am pouring blood-rain, and you are choking on it, and we are both so swollen that it aches in my abdomen. I plant myself to the floor beneath my desk. My ribcage blooms.

I wait for the teacher to hand me my classwork; the nurse comes instead. We walk to her office, the thousand desert miles to her office. She smells of cabbage. The smell sours when we walk through the door. I don't think she knows what to do with me. She points out her cat-themed scrubs. Tells me animals make kids feel less anxious in bad situations. Says the same for the mint walls. I hate her. I vomit on her cat print cabbage uniform and close my eyes and sink into the mildewed carpet.

...

Walking home alone deflates my head. I cut back three concrete alleys to our apartment, picking up shards of glass bottles along the way. It's popping trash- pimples on the face of the earth. I like the way the sidewalk houses green baby weeds, poking their head shyly to the sky. Then I realize they are me. I kill my fear between the soles of my shoes.

It is warm and black like coffee in my house. Lights off and sated. I'm pretty in the dark, invisible me. I place my angel wings on the coatrack and lean into the walls. The brutal burning in the cavity of my stomach grows. I feel like a half-eaten peach pit. I am alone in the nothing, alone in the dark. I attempt to vacuum the atmosphere through my teeth as I walk to the kitchen. Eyes more than open. One gulp, a couple trillion galaxies swallowed. Two. Three. I have to stop gulping the solar system down when the black holes begin dancing in my irises.

Father returns from work, heavier with me here. He takes off his coat and reaches for the wet blanket you left out for him. He's angry during dinner, throat deep and insistent. He is a box fan, and he hums too loud. I smash my thumbs into my mouth. My ears. My mistake.

I chop the lettuce and I bake the meatloaf and you would have worked late. I sit on the counter to eat my salad; Father goes straight for the meatloaf. He smothers it in ketchup, leaving me to watch the pink juices race each other down the sides of his chin. He is a sponge being squeezed. The ketchup looks like lipstick on the meatloaf's face.

I can feel his teeth mush food, mush my fingers and my body. Like pottery. I am his esophagus as it stretches over proportionate bites down his throat. My mouth waters. He finishes in five minutes and comes and kisses me on the mouth. I should bite the hand that feeds me, break my yellow baby teeth into his skin. Instead, I swallow my thoughts and sit there. I become a foreclosed house. I stay still and empty and can feel chunks of hamburger being ground with my spit. Taste like a kiln's ash residue.

It needed something, he states. He wipes his grease-mouth. Turns to the living

Ephemera

room and stitches himself to the television. I add ranch to my salad. Throw it away.

You usually make the meatloaf. I imagine you walking in, a casserole dish smothered in overcooked cow and peppermints and gravy, with Father's mother shaking a piece of your right foot and standing in the shadow. She never thought you were right for him.

They would laugh like ghosts do. Smile. You would set the dish in front of Father and smirk at me, Grandmother would glare and not forgive me, I would be lifted of the burden of not knowing her face: Everything would be in order. I close my eyes and wait for ten, thirty years.

Nothing changes. I wash the dishes and wash myself in the sink. Father is turning his grumbling creek underbelly to build a makeshift couch-bed. The box fan grunts and gives out.

...

I crawl to my room on all fours like an opossum. The walls are too green in here. I start itching. Scratching. I peel the paint with my eyelids and drag my blanket to the bathroom. The bathwater is set to scalding, it burns cold against my embryo. My wet baby hairs stab into my cheeks, too aware in their prodding. I am itching.

I can hear my millions in the other room asking for dinner. I say aloud I have already eaten.

I say aloud I will see your grave tomorrow.

I say, no, Mother's gravy. And I forget what I mean.

...

I wrap my blanket over my head and sink down to drink the halos pooling. My skin pops like glass on gravel. I can't stop seeing Almost-You. I keep my feet in the bath and flip my body over the tub, hanging upside down. The blood races down my face.

You told me once, if a person stays this way too long, the brain will either melt or explode. Opossums are immune to this.

A carpet of boils builds themselves on my kneecaps. Maybe the rats will eat my body if my head scrambles like eggs.

Or perhaps not, me from the other room calls. Rats wouldn't dare eat me. They are afraid of me, the Overload Opossum. They wouldn't dare.

Maybe Jackson Pollock would. You would never let him through the door, but you're not around much. The only problem is the locked front door. Just like Father asked. He didn't want you home tonight.

My chest wants to expand to fill the room with a singular me. The chest heaves, breathes, and hates it. I deflate and decide to try again later.

My skin is blossoming with blood pockets, swollen thick with heat. I am a canvas-pink explosion, and say, no, Pollock doesn't have enough weight on him anyway. An artistic stature. He's hollow like a child's marrow. Hungry.

There is a shudder in the timeline. The earth's ears are shaking away the quiet whimpers of my marrow. Gravity shifts like a flicker in a lightbulb, and I see Whole-You again. No skin dangling from your purple cheeks, no china exterior. Only you and your beautiful ankles and your crooked front teeth.

I ignore the real estate of my body cradling its own blue walls.

I ignore me when I tell myself to stop.

Right now, I am flammable. I ignite myself into the air, I burn every shell of me away.

I become art. My wrists crusted yellow, veins swollen and asking for forgiveness beneath the surface. I'm not insensitive-the baby weeds want air. I bite the skin through. They come running out, blue-green like the borealis, soft and slimy and appropriate. I give the blood home on the tile floor. Play dead for effect.

If I waited only a little longer, the meatloaf consistency of my body would finish painting itself.

You lie dead next to me, my umbilical cord strangling your neck. It will be a lifetime before it snows again, but you will always be dropping me off.

I hold our hundred palms together and sigh, too tired to open the door when Father knocks.

parental teachings

Taylor Downs

remember, child,
your father taught you to
always write your notes
on your forehead and
that you should never
stick a plastic fork
into anything cardboard
because it would stick like glue.
he always said to
count your eyelashes
and told you that you
shouldn't ever question why
his hats were
on top of the roof.

and from your mother,
you learned how to
cut off pieces of your ear
to improve your hearing.
and you always know for a fact
that the ink in your pen
will be blood,
and it'll forever be full.
she reminds you daily
to spill cranberry juice
on the carpet to help
your brother clean it,
and her parents always ask
if you ate any silverware
yet today as she does.

you've learned that
wherever you go,
your 15-foot long shadow
will follow you with a
steak-knife in hand and
a malicious grin on its face,
but you never put
ketchup on your ice-cream
because it's too cold for you.

Color

Dev Jaiswal

With my mother by my side, I navigate rack after rack of bright orange patched with golden florals, scratchy jeweled green shot with silver, and plain, sleek blue. My bare feet are cool against the knock-off marble. The air smells of fresh incense fumes wafting over handcrafted cloths. My ears distract me with sounds of honking motorcycles that turn a two-lane road into a five-way frenzy of street peddlers selling bundles of spinach at a mere eighty rupees per kilogram. My environment has the sounds and smells typical of any clothing *bazaar* in Modasa, India. My mother picks up the plain, sleek blue dress and asks me a question in her sweet Gujarati voice: “*Dekhai chai, na nana white dots?*” I shake my head no. Because of my colorblindness, I explain to my mother that I cannot see the white polka dots she says bedeck the blue dress. They are invisible. My mother nods, pats my head, and puts the dress back on the shelf.

While my mother so readily put away the object I could not see, some of my teachers back home in Mississippi have been more reluctant. When I asked my eighth-grade algebra teacher to put away the blue marker I could not see in favor of the black, she said, “Oh, Dev, you’re no fun.” Is solving for x more fun when in blue? I cannot change how I see the world, so I couldn’t understand why my teacher didn’t just change markers. The equation was still going to be solved the same way, and I should not have had to feel disregarded for asking my teacher to make a simple learning accommodation.

Maybe my teacher thought that color-coding math was the only way to learn it. Maybe she thought that disabilities mean that a person just can’t do certain things, that there’s no fix. I disagree. While sometimes there is no fix, most situations have simple solutions. My colorblindness doesn’t mean that I can’t do certain things. It just means that I do them differently.

So what if I physically cannot use an iPhone because there is no setting to change the blue-white color scheme that dominates the operating system? Android works just as well. So what if sometimes the colors of a black traffic light frame and a red light blend together? I am by no means a dangerous driver. I can see the green and yellow lights, and the lights are always in the same order: red at the top, yellow in the middle, green at the bottom. So if I can’t see the yellow or the green, then the traffic light must be red. Really, I don’t need to be able to tell the difference of the colors. All I need is my reasoning.

Strangely enough, the obsession my teacher and my classmates had with color did not translate over from math to an appreciation for the different colors of my skin or of my gods. I was the only non-white and non-Christian in the entire school, and my classmates judged me because of my brown skin, my Hindu religion, and my Indian background. Because of a fear of even further judgment, I did not showcase my full personality in my former school. I never felt comfortable being the video-

Ephemera

game-music-listening, parody-rapping, ballroom-dancing, acting, basketball-playing, astronomy-loving geek that I am.

I am colorblind, but are my classmates any different? At least I can see the diversity the world has to offer. I understand that the world is not black-and-white for all, nor does it encompass the full spectrum for all. Every individual thrives in this world in a different way, and it baffles me that the people at my former school could not respect that. Just as the same piece of bread will taste different to different people, blue is not blue to everybody. Color is not concrete. It's an extension of personality that an individual must define for himself. To me, color means freedom. I should be able to showcase my true personality wherever I am, and in doing so, I should be able to make others feel comfortable doing the same. My colorblindness does not chain me; it forms the foundation of my strength. Because of my ability to see diversity in the world, I know that my experiences will help me promote community as I move through my senior year at my new, more accepting alma mater, the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science. Just as my mother put away the blue dress I could not see, my experiences have helped me become the kind, accepting, and open-minded person I am today. As I move forward into college, I'm hopeful; I want to color the lives of people I meet along the way.

Across the Water

Peter Nguyen

The aroma of onion and coriander perfumed the air as I whiff the beast that lied in front of me. I'm invigorated by the sight of the cerulean bowl filled to the brim with broth that mother labored over for ten hours. I struggled to pick up the melamine chopsticks, wavering in anticipation of the steaming noodles. *Pho* connected me to my fondest memories and to the traditions I grew up with. My parents immigrated from Vietnam, a lotus flower shrouded by the presence of authoritarianism. They fled to the United States, abandoning a comfortable lifestyle with family and friends to start a new family. Like any other immigrant story, I was born into this world with the hope I would lead a better life than my parents. I took the weight of my parents' expectations and bundled it onto my back, almost as if the weight of the world compressed onto me.

As soon as I slurped the last of the broth, mother said, "Let's go to the beach." I rushed to the door and anticipated the sound of the ocean. When mother and father smiled, they would always take me to the beach. While my parents walked by the shore of the beach, I played in the water, splashing around like a beached fish. The waves caressed my feet as I played in the sand of Biloxi, a city that once thrived with tourism. After Hurricane Katrina swept my parents' house and livelihood away, mother and father stopped taking me to the beach, and they stopped smiling. Once we arrived and the "P" lit up from the PRNDL shift, I bolted out of the car and across the sand, grasping for the touch of the ocean. The water was like a blanket, soft in its crest and warm in its touch. It was familiar in the way it washed up and away on my legs. As I drifted into the crashing waves, mother shouted, "You have school in the morning. We have to go!" Recovering from the sudden beckoning, I dashed through the unlevelled sand, only to trip a few feet away. I picked myself up as if nothing happened, brushing the sand off, and rushed to the Toyota Camry.

D'Iberville Middle. A school filled with *diversity*. "What kind of Asian are you?" The phrase struck me like a blow to the head. I understood the question, even in all of its awkwardness. But the words I heard were "You don't belong here." I longed for acceptance, willing to cast away all I had ever known just for a grain of charity. The question popped up anywhere when I met a new *friend*. But I didn't give mind to it because I understood that to be accepted meant to endure any sorrow I may have felt. But there were things I couldn't handle. I kept to myself in Language Arts class, preparing for the upcoming nine-weeks exam. Teacher had left the room and told us we should behave and study while she was out of the room. "Peter has a small..." It erupted with no warning. I didn't know how to react. The phrase echoed throughout the room from one classmate to another. "I know this because of Santa Claus. He gave me pictures." Tears fell in rapid succession down from my face, in frustration because I had never experience something like this. The classroom erupted into laughter and stares, all pointed directly at me. The laughter sounded like battle

Ephemera

cries, and the pointing seemed like daggers at my heart, sharp with malintent. That same phrase rushed through my head, spinning circles over and over: *You don't belong here*. I rushed out of the classroom, wondering if I had done anything wrong. I curled up in the hallway and sobbed until the teacher told me to come in.

I limped off the bus, resolving to never tell mother what happened. I lifted my head to see mother opening the door. Mother's face covered with a bandana, and her feet garnered dirt-covered boots. She had waited for me all afternoon after finishing garden work. With no hesitation, I darted towards my mother's battered yet tender arms. "Let's eat dinner and then we can go to the beach," mother stated in Vietnamese as her hands brushed through my hair.

After scraping the last grain of rice, I enter the car and laid my head upon the leather-like seat, remembering everything that happened. The laughter, the points, the feeling of "differentness." Once the beach was in sight, I pushed the car door open, zipped through the sand, and locked sight on the shore of the beach as the sun fell asleep. I wanted to feel the sensation of the warm caress of the waves, the comfort of water. The waves crashed with brutal force upon the shore, glaring with a cold stare. The once-familiar silk touch had now become a flurry of punches. Too frightened to get near the water, I abandoned hope and turned away, but I felt a tug to my side. Mother held my hand as we both walked closer to the streamline. The water felt warm again, like what I had remembered before. The ocean was like the world: calm as the clouds sometimes but hellish as hurricanes at other times. I took this message to heart and rested my cheeks upon my mother's arm, drifting to sleep as mother carried me to the car. The Toyota Camry set course to home, and the sun settled.

Photographs

Sarah Perry

Cardboard shoeboxes and dusty photo albums cover the expandable oak dining table just outside the tiny kitchen. Abuelita's venerable hands sift through heaps of photographs. Her voice carries a smile behind it, and her eyes shine as she explains each one to me. After each picture, she passes it over to me to put away neatly.

I'm glad I wasn't so young then. I listen carefully; her voice is gentle, yet I stay ensnared in the web of tales she weaves. Anecdotes about my uncles' mischief make us both laugh, and I love to hear her chuckle. Like her voice, her laugh is gentle; mine is loud and I laugh longer than she does. Pictures surface of my cousins (too many to count on both hands), my parents, my brother, myself; pictures from the 70's, pictures from three years ago. Most have stories behind them that I'll only ever hear about.

I spot a creased black-and-white photograph, edges torn, with a note on the back. Half of the note is scratched out with black ink.

"What's this, Abuelita?"

I hand her the photo and she pauses, inspecting it with a close eye. I can tell that the woman in the picture is sitting next to me now. She has the same mischievous smile, the same shining eyes, the same gentle spirit.

"Oh..." She puts on her thick amber bifocals to take a better look at the photo, then glances at me and smiles. "This is from when Grampo and I first met."

I shuffle my chair closer to her, scraping it against the unfinished wood floors as I move.

"He had just bought this car," she says as she taps the photo with her index finger a few times. "He was so proud. But I thought it was silly; he already had a truck that worked perfectly well."

She smiles and hands the photo back to me. I flip it over and read the cursive on the back, trying to read what's crossed out.

Salvador and I –

He is a very wonderful guy. Fred took this picture, here at home.

I'm not quite sure whether or not I like that smile on my face!

The last half of the note is indecipherable.

I can recognize Abuelita right away in the photo, but I don't recognize Grampo. They're standing together, her in a neat white dress with her hands clasped in front of her, and him in a button-up with his hands in his pockets.

Grampo is eighty-two. In all the years of my life, I've never known him to be any younger. He has more wrinkles than I can count, tanned skin, and white hair. His lips curl around his teeth when he laughs or smiles. The Grampo I know is nothing like the one in the picture; he rarely has that youthful spark in his eye now.

I look back at the picture. I'll never be able to know what Grampo was like when he was younger, when he showed his teeth in a great grin when he smiled. Now, he'll crack some jokes, or say something witty and laugh, but I don't really know him.

Ephemera

I don't know if he really knows me.

I visit Abuelita and Grampo with Mama maybe once a year, if we're lucky; plane tickets are too expensive, and the 20-hour drive is too long. Each time, Abuelita reintroduces me to Grampo. He recognizes Mama, but I never know if he recognizes me.

"Here is Naomi," Abuelita says to him, gesturing at Mama. "*Na-o-mi*," loud and clear, so his hearing aids pick it up. He nods and smiles, and Mama hugs him.

"She brought Sarah," Abuelita says. "*Sa-rab*, your granddaughter!" Grampo looks at me for a moment, then nods, looking between Abuelita and me. I smile at him and he smiles back.

Sometimes he knows that his memory isn't good. Abuelita tells me that he learns about Alzheimer's when the nurses come to their house to take care of him but doesn't remember for the next day.

Sometimes he doesn't remember certain words in English. Abuelita has to say them in Spanish to him until he understands. It's a language he didn't pass on to his children. I've been told why, but I wish I knew from him. I wish he could tell me the stories about him and Abuelita when they first met. I wish I could know that the stories he tells are true. But there's no way.

Perhaps it's selfish.

"Uncle Johnny told me a story about you and Grampo," my auntie pipes in later as we go through more pictures. She speaks with a barely-noticeable accent. Abuelita just looks at her and smiles. "He says he would take you to the movies as a chaperone, then sit in the front row while you and Grampo sat in the back!" Auntie puts a hand over her heart, looking scandalized.

Abuelita smiles, not refuting the claims yet.

"... And I says, 'Oh my gosh!' But you wouldn't do *that*, right?" auntie asks. It seems like she's inherited that smile from Abuelita.

Abuelita smiles innocently, as if she hasn't heard what auntie said. "What? No, no..." She trails off and chuckles, looking from auntie to me. There's no way she can deny it.

These tiny snippets of Abuelita's life leave me wondering what else I don't know about her, what else I don't know about Grampo, what other wonderful stories I could uncover in the piles of cardboard shoeboxes and dusty photo albums.

Heath Ledger and Hip-Hugging Jeans

Madison Wypyski

I always felt like the odd one out, the piece of the puzzle placed in the wrong box, the red marble in a bag full of blues. When I moved to Chicago at the grown-up age of eleven, the first thing I noticed was the way everyone's speech was curt and crisp, placing "r's" where, as far as I was concerned, there was not a need for any. My lax, buttered tone couldn't keep up with the quick paced way of life. Never had I lived somewhere where the bus did not wait a couple extra minutes every morning for stragglers and people walked with such purpose on the street that you did not have the chance to stop them to say, "hello."

Despite the fact that Mama and I could no longer debate in the middle of the grocery store over which can of lima beans to purchase without getting eyes rolled in our direction, I did not mind Chicago. City life was interesting and pizza was different. I was beginning to accept my Northern fate with mild resolve, and then, September arrived. After the first week, I was convinced that Middle School was not so discreetly the tenth circle of hell, and as the new kid, I was at the epicenter of it all.

Every day when roll was called, teachers always read "Ella," and like clockwork, I would stand up to say, "It's Ella Mae, you know, like a double name." My classmates snickered and repeated, "It's Ellaaaa Maeeee," mocking me, and the teacher just smiled as if to say, "That's nice sweetie, but I won't be remembering that." The classroom, though, was where I strived to excel.

I knew that my peers and teachers alike would assume that the new girl from Sylacauga, Alabama, was going to struggle, but like my Daddy always says, "You know what they say about people who assume..." and I sure did show them. Every day after school, I poured over the arithmetic equations in my Common Core textbook, devoted to memory historical figures and facts from yellowing flashcards, and practiced saying words like "photosynthesis" -- without the Southern drawl. I was "burning the midnight oil," but high marks on tests and the respect of my instructors made the burn a little bit more palatable.

Still, what I wanted more than grades or adult respect, was to be liked by my peers, so I began observing what they did, what they wore, what they talked about, until I had compiled a mental list of all the things that I was convinced I wanted. I asked Mama if I could highlight my hair because "everyone else was doing it." She responded with a quick *no*, and after a tiring tantrum, I moved on to phase B of my plan: clothing. My floral dresses and white tennis shoes were just not going to cut it anymore. I needed a pair of hip-hugging jeans and a halter top; Mama said what I needed was to get myself to church.

I had also noticed that most of the kids loved movies. I had seen a couple of movies in the theater and specials in the morning, but back home, my brother and I

Ephemera

spent most of our time outside playing with the neighborhood children. So, I walked to the Blockbuster and sat in the aisles, reading the summaries on the backs of the movies cases. I learned quickly that many of the movie titles were misleading, and that *Silence of the Lambs* was not about fluffy sheep. The next day during recess when some of the girls in my class chatted about how much they loved Heath Ledger in *10 Things I Hate About You*, I joined the conversation asking what they thought about the modern take on Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*.

That conversation did not last long, and I spent the remainder of recess tucked in a dank library corner reading a book on dialect in the hopes of changing my accent. I sat on a threadbare couch in the back of the non-fiction room repeating vowels to myself and switching between *Say Goodbye to Your Southern Accent* and a beaten copy of *Cosmopolitan* magazine as I read aloud in my own self-taught Chicago accent. As I tried to whittle my voice into sharper sounds, I heard someone bump into the bookshelf directly in front of me. Looking up, I saw a gangly boy with tortoise-shell glasses and an awkward smile. He asked me, "What in God's name are you doing?" and I told him that he'd "better watch your mouth around a lady."

Returning to my reading, I only knew that the boy had sat down next to me by the sigh the couch gave as his weight repositioned the ancient springs. "My name is Kyle," he said, holding out his hand offering a shake.

Surprised, I took the hand and responded, "Ella Mae and just so you know, Kyle, if we are going to be friends, you have to call me by *all* of it."

"Well, Miss Ella Mae, this looks like the start of a beautiful friendship."

It wasn't like Kyle needed friends. He was a starter for the James Fields Middle School boys' hockey team, so friends came in the form of teammates, sports fans, and adoring fangirls. He walked with ease down the halls and was well-liked among his peers for his easy-going nature. Kyle was a listener, and boy, did he listen. Every day, for weeks, Kyle joined me in the library as I attempted to convert Alabama drawl. It didn't work very well, but nevertheless, Kyle sat with me, and I never understood why, but soon, I grew not to care.

Kyle became my best friend. He was a year older than me, so he was convinced he was a year wiser, and I let him think that for fear that I would lose the only friend I had. I did not feel the need to change around Kyle, and he encouraged me to stop chanting weird noises in the back of the library like an Alabama cult; and instead, he suggested I just let the others learn about the real Ella Mae from Sylacauga, accent and all.

We made a tradition out of ice skating at the Mt. Greenwood Ice Rink after school, and a painter's swatch of deep purple bruises later, I learned that roller skating in an Alabama cul-de-sac was much easier. Afterwards, Kyle and I would race to my house on thrifted BMX's where I introduced Kyle to some of Mama's pecan pie and Jalapeno cornbread muffins. With Kyle's help, I eased into my new life without compromising any part of myself – well, except for the fact that Mama eventually gave in and bought me a pair of those hip-hugging jeans, and that I still wonder what those girls think about the modern retelling of *Taming of the Shrew*.